

# ADULT LEARNING FOLLOWING JOB LOSS IN MID-CAREER WORKERS

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## Abstract

Critical theory, social constructivism and transformative learning were used to examine how and in what ways mid-career workers who experience job loss learn how to acquire new passion for life through their work. Findings of this study were that participants who lost their jobs found new passion in life through work because they were able to construct their identities independent of the hegemonic influences of corporate managers. The implication of this study is that adult education can be used to help people redefine their self-concepts and social concepts, following job loss, and that both of these can lead to positive social change.

## Introduction

The workforce in the United States has changed significantly during the last 15 years (Zunker, 2002). These changes include elimination of jobs by the development of new products and services, elimination of blue and white collar jobs because of reengineering and downsizing of corporations, outsourcing of jobs to other countries, and development of new jobs that offer fewer benefits and less pay with many being part time jobs.

Reengineering and downsizing are practices that often do not produce improvements in productivity or increases in net worth, the expected outcomes. One study conducted over a ten-year period showed that "fewer than 37 percent of companies realized any productivity improvements and less than half experienced any increases in net worth" (Bierema, 2000, p. 281). These continued practices have not justified the widespread loss of jobs.

The workers cut from reengineering and downsizing, which are disproportionately African-American and Hispanic, are often traumatized, and those who survive job cuts may experience soaring anxiety levels as they cope with the loss of control over their future work roles (Zunker, 2002). Joblessness affects different people in different ways, however, as some are able to find new passion in their work and in their lives following job loss, and others cannot. Mid-career workers are particularly hard hit, because since they are at the beginning of the maintenance stage of their careers, resolving conflicting demands within their organizations and personal lives, their lives can become torn when they lose their jobs and worry that they'll find age discrimination during job search.

So how is it that some people, particularly mid-career workers, manage to find new focus and satisfying career direction in their lives following job loss? What experiences cause them to successfully transition? How do they process these experiences, and what is different about how these people think about themselves, their occupations, and their attitudes toward corporations after they return to work? Following are answers to these questions in this study, whose purpose is to explore and explain, using critical theory, social constructivism, and transformative learning, how and in what ways mid-career workers who lose their jobs learn how to acquire new passion for life through their work.

Criticality, Constructivism, and Transformation of Job Loss

It is helpful to use critical theory, which is critical of social organization that privileges some at the expense of others (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1998), to analyze how mid-career workers, acting as their own agents, negotiate power, resist discrimination, and work their way through restrictions of their personal values. Habermas' (1984) theory of communicative action, in which he outlines a rational theory of emancipation, is "conceived as a cognitive conscious-raising process among socially interacting individuals" (Finger & Asun, 2001, p. 78). This helps explain how workers liberate themselves from corporate domination through dialogue, social and personal transformation. Freire (1997) described the social transformation of Central American oligarchies by educating both the oppressors and the oppressed through critical self-reflection, which he called conscientisation. Dialogue became the vehicle by which this education took place, and he wrote "a revolution is achieved with neither verbalism nor activism, but rather with praxis, that is, with reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed by all participants" (p. 107).

There is inertia of social change that results in people thinking and working toward change, in different time frames, at the individual and social levels. Cunningham (1993) writes that social and personal transformations are inextricably bound. However, they do not necessarily occur simultaneously. Some people need to concentrate on the more immediate (and personal) individual change while simultaneously working toward effecting social change, which may be an outcome of individual change, and that may take longer to achieve.

This is where social constructivism provides a foundation of understanding individual reality and transformative learning. Gergen (2001) identifies four foundational assumptions of social constructivism, which are working assumptions, rather than conclusions. The first one (2001) points out that there are potentially unlimited explanations and interpretations for each situation we encounter. Our language, pictures, symbols, and other forms of expression may limit our interpretation in one sense, but we can use our language to construct alternative interpretations, such as reframing the circumstances leading to our job loss in more positive ways. The second one (2000) tells us that meanings are formed from language and other forms of representation that are used within relationships. Relationships precede meanings but also differentiate and refine the meanings we connect with our assumptions. Brooks and Brooks (1999) explain that in order to understand, we must search for meaning, and in order to search for meaning, we must have the opportunity to form and ask questions. But in order to ask questions, we must engage in relationship building. That's why networking is so important before, during, and after job search. The third one (Gergen, 2001) tells us that language is a major component of our world of action, so social constructivism offers us a way to transform our social lives and build new futures. The fourth one (2001) tells us that every tradition restricts the formation of new traditions, and every creation undermines a tradition. We are confronted with what to save and what to discard or replace. If we generate changes within a tradition, we blind ourselves to alternatives lying outside the tradition. Gergen (1994), referring to the restructuring of reality, considers two fundamental characteristics of human conceptual activity, reflexivity and reconceptualization. Reflexivity is the capacity to consider your past in two interdependent ways: through the past reasserting itself, and through the present "transforming what is taken to be the past" (p. 18). The other, reconceptualization, allows you to use reflexivity to reshape your memory of personal past in ways that alter your meaning, because have the ability to create change in yourself that you can control.

Mezirow (1994) defined transformative learning as "the social process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to action (p. 222-3). Lazwell (1994) used transformative learning, among other adult learning theories, to explore and explain how the experience of job loss illuminates how adults change.

Using transformative learning to explain how adults learn following job loss has otherwise not been extensively studied.

### Method

This was a qualitative research study because I sought answers to the questions listed in the Introduction, and answering them required an approach that would lend itself to open ended questions of individual experiences within the context of their cultures and communities.

The research method I used in this study was in-depth interviewing. Marshall and Rossman (1999) explain that in-depth interviews are much more like conversations than formal events with predetermined response categories. Individual interviews allow immediate clarification and follow up. Focus groups allow the researcher to gather a wide variety of data across a larger number of subjects, but there is usually a trade off between breadth and depth. I used individual interviewing rather than focus groups because: I was interested in penetrating the farthest reaches of each participant's perspective of job loss; I believed using focus groups to talk about something intensely personal with participants who did not know one another would silence some participants; and focus groups would have been too logistically difficult to arrange. Limitations of in-depth interviewing, including effective interpersonal interaction, active listening, and the tendency to withhold pertinent information if not asked in appropriate ways, were anticipated and addressed. I previously met or knew the participants, researched their backgrounds before the interviews, and relied on taped recordings of the interviews to overcome problems with listening.

The approach was semi-structured; I had twenty five prepared questions that I asked all nine participants, and asked follow up questions to clarify and further probe their answers. All interviews, which took between two and three hours, were tape recorded, and I collected field notes of all interviews. Follow up telephone conversations were conducted to clarify and further check participant feedback. The interviews were transcribed, and coded according to common experiences, concepts and expressions of emotion, which later fit into recordable patterns.

### Findings

The participants in this study who lost their jobs found new passion in life through work because they were able to construct their identities independent of the hegemonic influences of corporate managers, their social circles, and even their families. Their ability to survive became due to their resilience. Their ability to transform became due to their ability to recognize that their priorities in life need to be based on their own choices, not those of outside influences.

In each case, the ability these participants had to express their personal values through accomplishing projects through their work was interrupted, without their control or involvement. They expressed profound loss of their jobs and resulting fear of financial pressure, but they also experienced personal affront to their values, because they suppressed them while employed. After job loss, they began thinking about their personal values, as Linda said.

They are more at the forefront of my mind. I had not been in a place where my core values weren't in synch until my last year at the company.

There was little opportunity for these participants to express their personal values, particularly when their boss's values were dissimilar. Consequently, when faced with reporting to multiple

bosses, or a succession of bosses, these people had to cope with complying with new value sets, which caused them dissonance.

The participants had differing views on their self-assumptions and how they changed following job loss. But many of them reversed the order of their priorities from being job focused to personally focused, following job loss. Hugh explained that he began to pay closer attention to his self-assumptions following job loss, which occurred when a friend sat him down and got him to think about how distorted he was, which resulted in his reprioritizing his assumptions. Ken thought about his self-assumptions in terms of the balance of his personal and work lives.

My feelings about myself, my self-esteem which started out pretty low, changed and increased because I learned, and kept thinking about the phrase, you work to live, you don't live to work and that you are not your job.

Some of the participants changed their assumptions about their occupations following job loss, in ways that reinforced and validated their self-assumptions. Ken and Vince, for example, both transitioned out of health care management because they were expected to shift their priorities from patient care to cost management, as Ken explained it.

My assumptions went from a field where you could do something positive for a larger group of people as a hospital manager to my assumption that cost is the only thing that matters anymore.

The participants all expressed loyalty to their former employers, a loyalty that was betrayed when they lost their jobs. Linda told me her assumptions of corporations, which she described as inanimate objects, connect directly to corporate leaders.

Leadership tends to be afraid to make difficult decisions and to be forthright with people about things that might not be easy to talk about, so I think leadership needs more coaching and assistance with how to tackle difficult issues that are related to people. But corporations are made up of leaders; that's where culture comes from. Corporations and culture come from the people who lead those organizations.

Vince's opinions were similar to Linda's, and he told me that organizations do not value loyalty to organizations; only people value loyalty to themselves.

The participants told me their support systems became necessary to their personal and social transformation. Interacting with their support systems meant engaging in discourse, which Mezirow (2000) explains "is the process in which we have an active dialogue with others to better understand the meaning of an experience" (p. 14) and is an essential activity in transformative learning.

Gaining control of their careers paradoxically occurred when they lost their jobs. They described job loss as a kind of death. Asked what they learned about job loss, they talked optimistically about: no longer allowing employers to compromise their personal values; the value of maintaining network contacts; and taking every social involvement as a possible opportunity.

The extent to which the participants viewed the control they began to have over their careers paralleled the control they began to feel of their lives. Hugh related his experience.

Oh yeah, in this process I took control of my life. The biggest difference was, in this period I was working for fear of failure. Then it happened, and I stumbled for a while. It was not a fun place to be, the fear of failure; it was awful.

Hugh, with the help of his support system, was able to successfully transition into an entirely new career by making meaning of his experience through reconceptualization.

The participants' experiences discussed above all point toward transformations of their self-concepts, which they reflexively constructed in the jobs they took following their unemployment following job loss.

Some of the participants in this study felt they were being sacrificed in order that the interests and continued employment of those in more powerful positions would be preserved, but each of them vowed not to allow their next employer to compromise their values, and they all felt committed to approaching their future leadership decision-making in a more socially responsible way.

### Discussion and Implications for Adult Education

The participants in this study all felt they took control of their lives following job loss because they discovered they did not have to allow their new employers to compromise their personal values. They reprioritized their frames of reference from career or company-focused to personally focused priorities, consciously taking action to ensure their new priorities would not be violated. They processed these experiences by questioning their assumptions about themselves, their occupations, and the corporations that rejected them, realizing those assumptions were not valid.

They began to think differently as they felt liberated from the dominant attitudes of their corporate managers, discovering that those managers often did not value the loyalty they gave to the corporations. They learned that they needed to control the balance between their work and personal time. They discovered company loyalty was no longer a valid or cherished phenomenon and that gaining perspective on where to place loyalties became not only a matter of corporate survival but development of self-concept as well. They saw disconnection between themselves and their former corporations and reprioritized their personal values to ensure the disconnection would not happen again. Finally, once they learned how to focus their personal values, they turned them into social concerns and actions.

Fenwick (2004) proposes that critical human resource development "dedicate itself to workplace and human resource reform by navigating a difficult meld between central commitments of critical pedagogy and critical social action with the tenets of individual, career, and organizational development in work-based contexts (p. 206)." The participants in this study, along with thousands of other former corporate refugees, could provide a nucleus of support for such reform, and so further studies are needed on such conscientisation.

The implication of this study is that adult education can be used to help people redefine their self-concepts and social concepts, following job loss, and that both of these can lead to positive social change. These redefined self-concepts allow people to find new passion in their lives through their work, leading to personal transformation. Simultaneously, these redefined social-concepts can liberate people from thinking they have to allow their employers to control their lives, that there are other more productive ways in which employers can relate to their

employees, and that society would work better if the employer-employee relationship were more democratic and less hegemonic.

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